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Music

TWO FROM SLASH

X

by Steve Erickson

In the black bloom of L.A. punk, X's role teeters between spearhead and anomaly. The reason for this is simple: X gets better and L.A. punk gets worse. I suspect it's only a matter of time before the current scene dispenses with X altogether; nostalgia, after all, only counts for so much, and sentiment, at least with the crowd we're talking about, is likely to count for even less. Already one hears gnashings that this band is becoming — get this — *slick*, which is like saying the Elephant Man got handsome once he washed up a bit. While it is certainly — as baldly revealed by *Wild Gift*, their new album due out next week on Slash Records — that one can now pick up melodies right off, and that John Doe sings with greater power and drama than ever before, and that Exene harmonizes with a precision that becomes more and more uncanny, and that Billy Zoom and Done Bonebrake embellish and punctuate the songs with a clarity and force not previously heard from this unit, it is also true that X is just getting sneakier and in the process has sacrificed nothing of what their music has always been about. In fact, if their 1980 debut, *Los Angeles*, served to map at dusk the lost frontiers, then *Wild Gift* is the guerilla raid across enemy lines at nightfall.

We all know where *that* territory is: it stretches from the Sylmar hills all the way to the Long Beach harbor and takes in the barrios to the east and ghettoes to the south and the bohemian rubble of the beach and the empty alleys at the core. It tends to be inhabited by America's spiritual refugees, who arrive from the Midwest and East Coast decrying the town's superficiality and within four months have telephone-answering machines and roller skates and the Beverly Hills sniffles from all the coke they've inhaled. How seriously can one take "punks" who two years ago viewed buying a Cheap Trick album as an act of aesthetic radicalism? But the real point of Los Angeles is that a city with no identity is left to feed on the identities of those who live there; and that those who live there are left scrambling for the identities they came, after all, to find.

What L.A. band has ever figured this out? The Byrds? Possibly; but they exploited it rather than confronted it, choosing strat-ospheres over streets and cerebralism over disjointed edginess. The Beach Boys? To the contrary: they were molested by the myth, giving birth to a horde of smaller myths. Buffalo Springfield? Neil Young yes, Stephen Stills no — as subsequent careers verified. The Lovin' Spoonful or the Seeds? Not quite. The Mamas and Papas or Love, Fleetwood Mac or the Eagles? Hardly even close. Which leaves one quartet fronted by a third-rate poet and a wreck of a human being named Jim Morrison, who, whatever his detractions, got a glimpse early on of L.A.'s long unseen shadow and decided to move in. And because he gave vision both to the voluptuousness of L.A.'s promise and the funhouse lights of L.A.'s scam, Morrison effectively pierced the adolescent id of the San Fernando Valley. No small feat: I know, I was there. Anyone who cannot understand the ever-flourishing popularity of the Doors in 1981 does not understand Los Angeles.

The funny thing about X is that they are both the Doors' legacy and rebuttal; in most of the city's new music, the sensuality of the Doors remains unaccompanied by Morrison's sense of odyssey — perhaps because Morrison himself never got very far with it, though surely he tried. By *L.A. Woman* (1971), the Doors were aware of, and deeply wounded by, the bankruptcy of sensuality without concern, exploration without a compass; and this is where X has picked up. I won't merely say I think both of X's albums are better than *L.A. Woman*, because I always thought *L.A. Woman* was overrated; I will go on to add that both John Doe and Exene are better than Morrison as poets, if not as sexual or cultural icons. Yet sex and culture is exactly what *Wild Gift* is about, fusing the mattress to the parking lot, and the act of sex to the pursuit of self that slithers across the Hollywood Freeway at rush hour. In the way they render most lucid the hand-to-hand combat in the trenches of the heart, and in the way they tally how often women seem to populate the body count, X has as much in common with Bessie Smith as with the Doors or, God knows, L.A. punk in general; and I think Jim Morrison, probably more than anyone, would have appreciated that.

That metaphorical interchange between sexual wasteland and cultural oblivion progresses right through *Wild Gift*, becoming more

Continued on page 24

photo by M. Hyett

photo by Howard Rosenberg

Flesh Eaters

by Bruce Rhodewalt

The Flesh Eaters' *A Minute to Pray A Second to Die*, just released by Ruby Records (Slash's sister label), is a good record in all respects but one; trouble is, the one flaw — the singing — is a serious one, and it will put off a great number of potential fans. While the record does grow on you, most first-time listeners won't make it much further than that.

The Flesh Eaters, in various line-ups, have been around Los Angeles off and on for several years. Leader and founder Chris D. (Desjardins), a former editor of *Slash* magazine, assembles various versions of the band occasionally for performance and recording. The first album, *No Questions Asked* (Upsetter), featured members of the Eyes and X, well-suited musicians for the fairly straightforward punk arrangements. But the record was mixed poorly, over-emphasizing Chris D.'s voice and thrusting it into a spotlight it couldn't survive.

The current Flesh Eaters line-up is even better, a true L.A. supergroup. John Doe from X plays bass and D.J. Bonebrake plays percussion. Dave Alvin of the Blasters plays guitar and Bill Bateman of the Blasters plays drums, Steve Berlin — from Top Jimmy and the Rhythm Pigs, Phast Phreddie and Thee Precisions, *and* Beachy and the Beachnuts — plays sax. One could hardly find a better group of musicians, especially with Bateman, one of the most powerful drummers around.

Onstage, the Flesh Eaters are an inspired but loose group, watching each other for cues and barely walking away from song endings. This is excusable: with all their other commitments, they can hardly have time to rehearse endlessly, and the group can never be a full-time entity anyway. To the credit of all involved, however, the music on record is tight, imaginative and exciting. The songs make use of the same heavy metal idioms that X has been putting to such good use; and, as with the X recordings, vaguely pentatonic riffs are given enough 1977 energy and a clean enough mix to make them almost unrecognizable as the same building blocks Deep Purple and Black Sabbath used so obnoxiously ten years ago.

Marimbas and saxes add a lot to the Flesh Eaters' versatility, making them sound at times like a Roxy Music rave-up ("See You in the Boneyard") and at other times like the E Street Band ("Cyrano de Berger's Back"). The latter song, the one song on the album written by John Doe, begins with a D-B minor riff on marimbas that sounds remarkably like Bruce Springsteen's "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out." Steve Berlin's soprano sax, used sparingly, provides just the skirl this raucous music needs.

A Minute to Pray... begins with a quiet patch of miscellaneous sounds, played behind Chris D's distracted recitation of the first lines of "Digging My Grave": "Joyride leading to jail/ and as it breaks through the wall/ A ten year old learns how to die/ Headache under fluorescent light/ White fright's digging my grave/ and the porcelain warms me up." An exciting and simple IV-I guitar riff in 3/4 time follows, quickly becoming the song's 4/4 riff. Once this is established, the singing begins, setting the tone for the record: excellent music performed flawlessly, but pointlessly interrupted by distracting singing.

The singing style, which is mostly off-key wailing, is probably meant to convey terror (it sure scares cats); ostensibly, terror is what the lyrics are about. However, Chris D.'s singing is so predictable (the same shriek throughout, always flat to the same degree) and unintelligible that the lyrics might as well just be "Whaghh" all the way through. Ruby has thoughtfully

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